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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that, based on certain rhetorical theories and on one instructor's experience, writing structures--both deep and surface--potentially serve three positive purposes: facilitation of thought, foundation for growth, and voice validation. The paper contends that the ultimate effect of these attributes is freedom. Concerns of some teachers and theorists about traditional approaches to writing are mainly that they (1) define form as mere medium of content, and (2) overemphasize forms, neglecting content. The point is that a person need not be "either/or" when it comes to deciding between content and form or structure--both are essential to meaning. The structures of writing help stimulate the process of thinking and ultimately, meaning-making, and they can serve as foundations for growth. It seems important to recognize that a writing process is not merely embodied within a particular writing project, but exists on another, larger level--this writing process involves the stages of an individual's growth and development over time, the scope being the individual's academic and professional experiences, social interactions, personal explorations, developing worldviews, life adjustments, and so on. The paper concludes that, if anything, structures should guide students in possible directions, thus giving them more confidence and focus when approaching a writing assignment. (Contains 12 references.) (NKA)

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Structures in Writing: Foundations and Facilitators for Freedom

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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Structures in Writing: Foundations and Facilitators for Freedom

As the lights dim in my Language Arts Methods class, the required education section for graduate students seeking certification to teach English, I envision another kind of darkness settling over the room. The professor of the class--I'll call her Dr. Slick--props a transparency of a rough writing sample on the overhead projector and informs the class that now is the time in the writing process to address organizational and textual structures within, and working from, our own youths' developing drafts. The projected text which we now study lacks depth and clarity, harbors informal style and distracting grammatical errors. It is, after all, a rough draft. Nothing abnormal. But as I mull over the draft, a sense of vagueness looms in my head about what Dr. Slick tells us to do. Her directive is not disorienting but for the fact that, at the beginning of the semester, Dr. Slick--a "social constructivist"--mentioned that grammar wasn't important and that we were to discard the five-paragraph essay. It is not deluding but for the fact that when the time *does* come to guide our young students through revision of their drafts, Dr. Slick has little to say. Other than a random pointing here or a jotting there, she offers few specifics about how to teach or how students are to learn coherence, unity, or sentence structure. The indirectness, the ambivalence of the matter gives me the impression that she assumes we student teachers can teach these things pulled from thin air--or thick air, as it were. It seems to mirror, also, an assumption that our own young charges will somehow know or learn them by revelation. At this moment, little about the lesson appears very constructive--socially or otherwise.

So, I, as teacher, am told to convey needed structural knowledge to students without really using certain traditional terms--Dr. Slick's taboos--like or synonymous with "thesis statement," "topic sentence," "transition," "support," "introduction," and "conclusion." Or like, dare I say, "comma splice." I am to convey--*sort of*, I suppose?- what definitely exists in writing, what Winston Weathers (1970) refers to in his article, "Teaching Style. A Possible Anatomy," as "stylistic material": "(Certain) real materials exist in style--measurable, identifiable, describable. . . real material that serves as the substantive of style, this material being of three general kinds: individual words; collections of words into phrases, sentences, and paragraphs; and larger architectural units of composition" (p. 295). Yet how, I wonder, will students grasp organizational and language concepts with regard to their drafts and to writing as a whole when, by Dr. Slick's method, they are given arbitrary, ambiguous snippets of insight about what needs fixing? This kind of muddled teaching of structure, I feel, is bound to leave students unfocused, insecure, and exasperated as writers who can never quite assess the meaning and the purpose behind what the teacher chooses to reveal to them--writers who cannot see the house for the bricks. "The problem," cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner (1960) suggests on a more encompassing level in *The Process of Education*, "is how to construct curricula that can be taught by ordinary teachers to ordinary

students and that at the same time reflect clearly the basic or underlying principles of various fields of inquiry" (p. 18).

The matter of structure involves, essentially, issues of freedom and restriction. The consequent challenge entails learning whether and/or to what extent to introduce structures to student writers in light of the question: How do I as teacher provide reasonable guidance and, at the same time, non-restrictive, non-limiting environments for student writers? In *The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders*, an investigation of the writing processes of eight students in case studies, Janet Emig (1971) raises the question in terms of whether or not teachers should specify writing assignments. Her ambivalence is easily identifiable in terms of writing structures:

> There seems to be some evidence that a delicate balance, if not a paradox, exists in the giving of assignments. If the teacher sets too many of the variables for a piece of writing (we need to know far more about how many are too many, and which variables are more significant than others), some students feel too confined, too constricted by the limitations to write "well." If the teacher does not specify enough variables (again, how many are enough, and for what student?), the task may daunt at least some students by its ambiguity . . . ." (p. 53)

Non-traditional teachers today generally tend to emphasize the notion that writing environments for students should be as non-restrictive as possible. This popular view, I think, often overshadows students' other, balancing need for guidance. Structures--deep "architectural units" as well as more surface "collections of words"--I will attempt to justify here, need to be explicitly addressed, to some extent, in basic composition classrooms if we expect student writers to become--though it sounds paradoxical--proficient, independent writers. Furthermore, thoughtful theorists of "alternative" rhetorics, I believe, actually acknowledge the importance of these aspects--though often viewed as "traditional"--and incorporate them into their classrooms.

Traditional, formalist rhetorics, like what James Berlin (1987) in *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985* terms "current-traditional" rhetoric, emphasize "superficial correctness--spelling, punctuation, usage, syntax--and . . . paragraph structure" (p. 38). Its forms of discourse usually emphasize description, narration, and exposition. According to Joyce Carroll and Edward Wilson (1993), in *Acts of Teaching: How to Teach Writing*, traditional rhetoric is a vestige of the "industrial age," teacher-centered, individually and passively produced, rigid and rule-laden, focused on form as dictator of meaning, and product-oriented. (p. 2) Carroll and Wilson contrast this "product paradigm" with a newer, alternative "process paradigm" more flexible, student-centered, focused on meaning as dictator of form, and alternatively or unconventionally practiced and evaluated. (p. 2) While Berlin (1982) does not suggest that current-traditional rhetoric is necessarily product-oriented--indeed, it is often process-oriented (pp. 20-21)--Carroll and Wilson's "product paradigm" evidently has much in common with Berlin's

current-traditional rhetoric. Thus, we can gain a general idea of the characteristics of "traditional" rhetoric which, incidentally, has dominated in writing classrooms for the past 100 years and is being challenged today by numerous alternative approaches to writing. While current-traditional rhetoric still dominates in textbooks and classrooms, many teachers and theorists today agree that current-traditional rhetoric is inadequate for teaching students "a notion of the writing process that will enable them to become effective persons as they become effective writers" (Berlin, 1982, p. 20).

However, a reactive tendency exists, among some theorists/teachers, I think, in so wanting to disassociate from flawed current-traditional rhetoric, to disown anything that appears related to it. From what I have seen, the attempt to break all associations with specific traditional practices has led some teachers to drastically, if not altogether, detach themselves from teaching any semblance of structure and arrangement. To be sure, the arguments against traditional rhetorics and teaching philosophies obsessed with structure and arrangement are legitimate. Rhetorics like current-traditional do fall into the trap of focusing on structural components in writing to the detriment of content matter. (Berlin, 1987, p. 38) And they do often assume that structure has no relation to content matter or meaning. (Berlin, 1987, p. 8) But this attitude seems to be the basis, in some cases, for careless practice and harmful classifications among teaching philosophies. The common reaction becomes a scornful neglect of elements influential to writing in many positive ways.

Recently I read about a middle-school English teacher who so opposed putting structural constraints on students that she neglected, apparently, to teach certain fundamentals or to require that students be responsible for them. In helping students submit written work to a school literary magazine, the teacher, Linda Rief (1992) explains in *Seeking Diversity*:

> Each piece submitted by a student is supposed to be typed on the school computer and saved on a class disk. As the final editor, I can call up the pieces to make sure they are mechanically correct. I want writing that goes beyond my classroom to be the best it can be. Every writer has an editor who saves him or her from embarrassment of mechanical errors. Student writing that goes beyond the classroom should be handled the same way. (p. 28)

This notion of an *outside editor* saving students from embarrassment is appalling to me and conjures a vision of the illiterate masses who must go to an elite few for enlightenment. (Ironically, editors *are* probably educated in the traditional forms which Rief spurns.) The illustration demonstrates the careless tendency I see among some teachers, in wanting to rid themselves of traditional refuse, to burn both the grain and the chaff of conventional writing elements. Unfortunately, the students are the ones who suffer, who cannot become independent writers.

Based on certain rhetorical theories and on my experience, however, writing structures--both deep and surface--potentially

serve, I suggest, three positive purposes: facilitation of thought, foundation for growth, and voice validation. The ultimate effect of these attributes is freedom.

Initially, at the outset, I want to address the concerns of some teachers and theorists about traditional approaches to writing--mainly that they 1) define form as mere medium of content and 2) overemphasize forms, neglecting content. The concerns are fair in so far as they are true faults of current-traditional rhetoric. But such arguments, when they result in the abandoning of forms altogether, smack of the very "either/or" paradigm they seek to demolish--as if one must choose between content and form. The argument seems particularly ironic since the disagreement is usually *not* about whether or not structure should be taught. Carroll and Wilson, for instance, who share Rief's alternative philosophy of teaching, state: "The issue is not whether or not grammar should be taught, but when it should be taught. When grammar is taught at the right places, students appreciate the opportunity to make their writing better" (p. 36). To be sure, in Rief's class, even this matter appears neglected. Carroll and Wilson's idea, though, is that structures should be addressed later, in piecemeal, in the writing process--and, most notably, de-emphasized.

Though content and thought are, in a sense, more important than form, such form, I believe, is not--should not be--contrary to meaning in the way in which it is often viewed. For structures in writing are more than mere surface features; they actually help make and contribute to meaning. In her essay, "Understanding Composing," Sondra Perl (1980) describes the important process of structuring language in order to construct meaning:

> It seems as though a felt sense has within it many possible structures or forms. As we shape what we intend to say, we are further structuring our sense while correspondingly shaping our piece of writing. . . . In writing, meaning is crafted and constructed. It involves a process of coming-into-being. . . . (When) we are successful at this process, we end up with a product that teaches us something, that clarifies what we know (or what we knew at one point only implicitly), and that lifts out or explicates or enlarges our experience. (p. 153)

Forms--even specific grammatical forms--are important, clearly, because they are an intrinsic part of ideas and content in writing.

Berlin (1982) finds reconciliation between structure and content embodied in various rhetorical approaches: "Like Neo-Aristotelian Rhetoric, the New Rhetoric sees truth as probabilistic, and it provides students with techniques--heuristics--for discovering it, or . . . creating it. This does not mean, however, that arrangement and style are regarded as unimportant . . . . In fact, the attention paid to these matters in the New Rhetoric rivals that paid in Current-Traditional Rhetoric, but not because they are the only teachable part of the process. Structure and language are a part of the formation of meaning, are at the center of the

discovery of truth, not simply the dress of thought" (p. 19). Berlin and Perl suggest that structure and arrangement are as essential to writing as content, because the structures of writing themselves make and clarify the meaning of content. My point, consequently, is that one need not be "either/or" when it comes to deciding between content and form or structure. Both, I believe, are essential to meaning.

Based on this theory, it is not hard to imagine that structures of writing can help the writer clarify internal thinking before, while, and after writing--can help facilitate and clarify thought. I learn from the structures, for instance, how to reason, because the structures in writing portray the structures of reasoning. Bruner elaborates, "Grasping the structure of a subject is understanding it in a way that permits many other things to be related to it meaningfully. To learn structure, in short, is to learn how to learn" (p. 7). Berlin (1987) explains the cognitive views of Bruner (and also theorist Piaget) that, in theory, support writing forms: "The structures of the mind are such that they correspond to the structures of reality, the structures of the minds of the audience, and the structures of language. Learning to write requires the cultivation of the appropriate cognitive structures so that the structures of reality, the audience, and language can be understood" (p. 159). The structures, in other words, help crystallize and organize thought. A dialogue of ordering--both with oneself and with others--occurs: "What do I think? Why? What experiences and intuitions cause me to think this way? Which illustrations verify this thinking?" Opposing perspectives also become apparent: "What are the counter-arguments? Which reasons are valid? What matches my experience?" Berlin articulates that the "crucial feature of these transactional activities is that new knowledge, new truths, emerge from the interaction. The rhetorical act discovers meaning in its proper realm . . . ." (pp. 15-16). The structures, then, help stimulate the process of thinking and, ultimately, meaning-making. In addition, they serve as a framework in which to approach or grapple with a mammoth idea.

Secondly, writing structures can serve as foundations for growth. We talk of the writing process as if it were merely embodied within a particular writing project. But it seems important to recognize that a writing process exists on another, larger level. This writing process involves the stages of an individual's growth and development over time, the scope being one's academic and professional experiences, social interactions, personal explorations, developing worldviews, life adjustments, and so on. In his essay, "Writing and Knowing: Toward Redefining the Writing Process," James Reither (1985) notes, "The 'micro-theory' of process now current in composition studies needs too be expanded into a 'macro-theory' encompassing activities, processes, and kinds of knowing that come into play long before the impulse to write is even possible" (p. 164). It takes more than one writing class to learn writing, I've learned. Starting with foundations--including writing foundations--one begins a process of life-long learning that leads to choices, to unique expression, to refining one's beliefs, to freedom. One must go through the

process, the necessary steps of growth and development to reach a greater freedom.

As such, to assume that I can subvert the process of learning how to write well doesn't make sense, because learning is "a continual broadening and deepening of knowledge in terms of basic and general ideas," rendering later performance more efficient. (Bruner, p. 17) To pretend that beginning student writers can somehow write as if they were not beginners hurts the student. Carroll and Wilson, in an attempt to abandon teaching any conventional foundations to students, imply that the unstructured idiosyncrasies mastered by the experienced writer should be introduced to the beginning student writer (instead of conventional sentence structures): ". . . developing sentence sense depends less upon memorizing a definition and more upon struggling with words . . . . Knowing when a sentence works is akin to knowing when training wheels are no longer needed on a bike" (p. 37). In opposing narrow sentence definitions, though, they actually support them by their illustration. Structures, true, are not absolute, and students should not be limited by them in their expressions. But training wheels--my point--are necessary initially--not to limit but to guide. The thing is, if students don't have any concept of a sentence, what will they base new concepts on? One must know, in other words, what is orthodox before one can know what is unorthodox and, therefore, when, say, unorthodox forms will or will not work. My own writing developed this way--unless my learning of traditional sentences before "altered" sentences is coincidental. I like to know what's known, what's there, before I branch out into new territory. Structures help me gage my perspective and offer me a lighted window when it's dark outside.

Structures may be more consciously imposed on a writing project near its completion, but they are not just an end--though they, of course, contribute to and affect the end product presented to a reader, an academic community, etc. Structures also serve as means to an end. They are means in that they give writers something to "bump" against--an action Professor James Kastely uses to describe forces in social interaction (personal communication)--to successfully discover their own writing styles. Though Reither writes in the context of academic inquiry, his idea is telling: "Out of this immersion in academic inquiry and out of the ways they see themselves and others . . students can construct appropriate models. That is, they can see effective and ineffective writing, reading, and inquiry conventions, strategies, and behaviors at work" (p. 167). In other words, one's writing takes shape largely by constraining forces rubbing against it, by the "interactions of the elements of the rhetorical situation: an interaction of . . . the elements--subject, object, audience, and language--operating simultaneously" (Berlin, 1987, p. 15). The forces, apparently, are many things--another writer's style, a professor's comment, an event, a newscast, a song, etc.--and so it is not incredible to say that a writing structure, too, *even* a standardized, confined form--like the five-paragraph essay--can be a force of creation. For structures provide the basic scaffolding--as Bruner or Vygotsky might call them in this case--upon which to build ones own bay

windows, buttresses, spires, or front porches. Or they provide doorways to new ideas and forms. The more I write, gaining experience writing, the more I learn that the structures are not absolute, that they are starting points, that writing varies and that the best writing often diverges from traditional forms. Coming into contact with such influences, I have the opportunity to creatively imitate or to reject and abandon. The choice itself, though, is crucial. Weathers stresses the point:

> . . . (We) should say that style is the proof of a human being's individuality, that style is a writer's revelation of himself, that through style, attitudes and values are communicated, that indeed our manner is part of our message. We can remind students of Aristotle's observation, 'character is the making of choices,' and point out that since style, by its very nature, is the art of selection, how we choose says something about who we are. (p. 294)

Essentially, I learn from the structures themselves how to build upon or to abandon them at will. This ability frees me as a thinker and writer.

Some call writing a risk. I agree. But intelligent risk-taking, in considering risk-taking in many aspects of life, would seem to involve the stepping out, the crossing of threshold from what one already knows, from the structures that one knows, to find new answers, experiences, expressions, or successes. Kevin Ryan and James Cooper (1998), in the text *Those Who Can, Teach*, help convey this idea: "Cognitive psychologists have . . . discovered that if learners are to retain new information and find it meaningful, it must be *related to what the learner already knows*. These knowledge structure relationships are called schemas or schemata and are changing constantly as new information is taken in" (emphasis mine, p. 168). Writing with no option for risk or non-risk--because the forms have never been housed--seems more desperation than risk. It becomes, instead, an overwhelming, uncontrolled undertaking in which the student finds no place to rest or bump and can only pray for divine intervention. Structures, in this case, make the beginning writer less fearful of sorting and expressing ideas for herself and her readers. Her confidence to write "in-house" at the university mitigates the confusion her high-school heart once harbored for an arbitrary page of academic scrabble. Looking back, I as the beginning writer sometimes used to overly concern myself with maintaining the house of safe structure, generating little thought for anything else. But now, in gaining experience and coming to be more familiar with the abode, I more often look outside the doorway of this house, seeking more beyond it, assured that I have a place to return if necessary. Structures, then, serve as home bases for orientation.

Lastly, structures are important because they help organize ideas for presentation to an appropriate audience or reader, giving the writer's voice validation. In referring back to the youth's rough draft on the overhead, I ask myself what this writer is trying to tell me. What is the point? Where is it going? As it stands, the passage would be appropriate only within the context of a

personal letter to a friend. And it's fine for that purpose. But unless severely revised, it would prove incompetent in other contexts like business, journalism, economics, politics, etc., much less in academia. I am disturbed by this. Unless the factors of deep and surface structure are explicitly addressed and rigorously applied, the youngster's draft will never meet a standard required in the prominent and powerful sectors of society. For while an individual may have profound things to say, her inability to organize these things in any meaningful, presentable way often renders the most brilliant idea ineffective or invisible altogether. As a writer and teacher, I want myself and my students to be bright, active thinkers and to be viewed as such. Students who are not able to take their writing to an academic and/or professional level--or to write in contexts for audiences besides their non-judgmental best friends--will be hampered in their effort to gain noted expression and legitimacy in these critical environments. As a result, they will also be hampered from freedom. Weathers says it well:

> We can tell students that style is a gesture of personal freedom against inflexible states of mind; that in a very real way--because it is the art of choice and option--style has something to do with freedom . . . . We can reveal to students the connection between democracy and style, saying that the style is a part of our democratic and free experience. And finally . . . that with the acquisition of a plurality of styles (and we are after pluralities, aren't we? not *just* the plain style?) the student is equipping himself for a more adaptive way of life within a society increasingly complex and multifaceted. (p. 295)

Weathers goes on to say that if we teachers do a good job of "publicizing" for students this importance of style, "our students will know that we are playing this game for real" (p. 295). Structural or stylistic competency that leads to voice validation should not be neglected, because voice is essential in a real, democratic society which calls for a vital exchange of ideas.

It is easy, I think, for the experienced writer to say that the traditional structures are not necessary, because, through experience, she is not or no longer (if she ever was) bound by them or in need of them. But probably most proficient writers, I will venture, *know* these structures, regardless of whether they choose to take or to leave them. Competent writers know the aspects that make writing coherent, unified, logical, smooth, and presentable--to both the writer's and the reader's mind. Kenneth Bruffee (1984), citing Richard Rorty, observes in "Peer Tutoring": "In normal discourse . . . everyone agrees on the 'set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as a question, what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it.' . . . Not to have mastered the normal discourse of a discipline, no matter how many 'facts' or data one may know, is not to be knowledgeable in that discipline" (pp. 8-9). Obviously, the inexperienced writer--the inexperienced academic writer, in particular--does not have this structural foundation, this point of reference, this knowledge. So what are we, as teachers, to do? Do we help students think better in not providing explicit guidelines for organizing their reflections? Do we hinder students

by hiding these insights and assuming that they will eventually get revelation about it all in the way a poet finds hidden truths in the natural or ordinary? According to Reither, Bruffee argues that "we must analyze and teach the conventions of academic discourse" (p. 165). Various discourses, I believe, in fact, should be taught to students according to their needs as academics, professionals, citizens, and individuals. Appropriate structural insights, in any case, should be explicit, made conscious to the student--who will *not* get them by chance or ambiguity.

Teaching structures in writing does not have to mean--should not mean--limiting students. The challenge, I reiterate, is knowing how to provide guidance without restriction. If anything, structures should guide students in possible directions. They should give students more confidence and focus when approaching a writing assignment. If perceived and applied properly, they ought to "scaffold" the shaky writer, not confine her. In addition, teaching structures should not mean alienating students. Confusing, complicated structures defeat their own purposes. A teacher may need to ask simply, "What is your point in this paragraph? What are you stressing in this sentence?" instead of "What is the thesis statement? Which is the subordinate clause?" The questions, however, *do* need to be addressed in some manner. Ryan and Cooper (1998) sum up Bruner's idea of structure of the disciplines which parallels my own thinking of forms in writing: "Instead of studying random facts or incidental phenomena, students should learn the principles that constitute the heart of a discipline . . . ." (p. 236). As a teacher, I want to introduce such principles--the heart of writing--to students, because I want them to become proficient and, ultimately, liberated writers. By offering students structures from where they can build--or abandon--their own fortresses, and by giving them choices within writing--choice to risk or not risk, I help them find freedom. By making them aware of the known rules of the game, I offer them perspective. They have the resources and the control to decide. With a clear point of departure, students know there will be a destination, even if they don't know exactly where it is. Ultimately, they find their clear, confident, unique voices and forms. Structures, in this case, *are* constructive.

Having listened to Dr. Slick's dim counsel concerning the teaching of structures in writing, I leave her class wondering what she is trying to tell me, what point she is trying to make. Her room is still dark. To teach or not to teach structure? Or, is the question when? Is there one answer? Do my student writers need to know as well? As a writer and teacher, I crave something clear and tangible, something explicit. Amidst a chaos of possibilities, I am desperate, at some point, for order and control, for awareness and perspective--alas, for freedom. Hopefully, a revelation will light soon.

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